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Sweet Home Chiraq

"Everything gonna be alright this mornin'," sang Muddy Waters on his famous 1955 track, "Mannish Boy". Muddy Waters, the black founder of Chicago blues, never could have imagined the profound influence he would someday have on the music industry as a whole, even influencing modern rap music. Today's rap artists, who are predominately black, write lyrics containing many of the same themes and emotions as their blues predecessors, yet many people passionately dislike rap music while holding firm to a respect for the blues. Despite the blatant similarities between the two genres, many white Americans are unwilling to look past the gang violence that has often been associated with rap music as a way to justify racism against black Americans. Chicago, a breeding ground for many blues and rap artists and home to many high-status whites and low-status blacks, provides the most clear-cut example of musical dislike interacting with social exclusion.

Blues music holds a special place in the hearts of many Americans, and for good reason. Brought to America by slaves, the blues formed out of African oral tradition on Southern plantations in the nineteenth century. Cathartic and emotional, the blues evolved from the daily field hollers and hymns the African slaves made up as a way to communicate and pass the time (Kopp par. 3). These work songs expressed the slaves' many emotions and problems, and they were often spiritual, political, and even sexual in nature. While this new style of meditative music remained unique to the slaves for many years, it gradually nudged its way into every saloon after Americans became more understanding of the plight of the slaves.

Almost a century after its inception, the blues finally made a name for itself in America. During the early twentieth century, sheet music became available for burgeoning blues artists to properly compose and share their music ("Blues as Protest" par. 1). Due to the arrival of sheet

music, the blues gained popularity among the greater American population as it snaked its way up the Mississippi River. In like manner, many blues artists found a home in urban Chicago during the Great Migration, a period from 1917 to 1970 in which millions of blacks moved from the South to the North in search of a better life (History.com Staff par. 1). As a result, Chicago produced a plethora of the world's most legendary blues artists, such as Koko Taylor, Howlin' Wolf, and Muddy Waters. These artists invigorated their songs with the use of electrically amplified guitars, drums, pianos, and saxophones, inventing a new, more upbeat style of blues aptly dubbed the "Chicago Blues."

In Chicago, blues music and its artists gained the admiration and respect of the city. Even today, the music is continually celebrated through events like the Chicago Blues Festival—the largest free blues festival in the world—which brings 650,000 blues aficionados together over the course of three days ("Blues Chicago" par. 2, 5). During the festival's 2017 run, the City of Chicago dedicated a 10-story mural to Muddy Waters designed by Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra (Blistein par. 1, 3). The city even has plans to open the Chicago Blues Experience in 2019, a museum that Mayor Rahm Emanuel believes "will help visitors from around the world connect with one of America's greatest art forms" (qtd. in Matthews par. 8). Clearly, this style of music devised by Southern slaves almost 200 years ago continues to be loved and appreciated by the city that fostered its evolution.

Aside from the blues, a great deal of rap music has also come out of the Windy City. Highly respected in Africa, the earliest rappers were called griots, and they spread praise, news, and knowledge to the people of their tribal villages through spoken word (Blanchard par. 6). Author Geneva Smitherman thoroughly explains why the griots' work was vital to African culture in her 1977 novel *Talkin and Testifyin*. In a chapter titled "How I Got Ovuh",

Smitherman notes the West African concept of Nommo, “the magic power of the Word,” which was “believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things” (78). African griot culture and the belief in the power of words evolved further in America when slaves made up rhymes encoded with secret uplifting messages about sticking together and outsmarting their slave masters, who often forbade them to speak to each other (Davey D par. 15). The rhymes and metaphors the slaves spoke in would sound quite similar to some of today’s popular rap songs.

Counter to the blues, though, rap did not reach musical prominence until the early 1970s. In 1970s New York, black musicians began experimenting with turntables and eventually became the first disc jockeys (DJs). At parties, microphone controllers (MCs) introduced the DJs and gave special shout-outs to audience members in a manner quite similar to a griot’s oration (Blanchard par. 3). MCs became the first modern American rappers, and as they increasingly landed slots on radio stations, the American public was introduced to this exciting new genre. In Chicago, the first major rap artist to emerge was Ten Tray in 1991, followed by Common Sense and Tung Twista a year later (Giordano’s par. 33-35). Most prominent of all the early Chicago rappers was and is Kanye West, who released his first studio album *The College Dropout* in 2004. This album and subsequent albums have sold millions of units worldwide and have influenced the rap genre profoundly. Unlike the “gangsta rap” that dominated the rap scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the tracks released by the early Chicago artists were generally less vulgar, violent, and misogynistic. Later Chicago acts such as Lupe Fiasco and Chance the Rapper have taken a similar Nommo-like approach, “using rap music as a vehicle for vivid and powerful storytelling and to address important social issues” (Giordano’s par. 57). Despite the fact that most Chicago rap artists have stayed true to their African roots in a manner similar to

Chicago blues artists, the presence of gangsta rap throughout America has tainted the way many white Chicagoans view the genre of rap as a whole.

Of all the reasons people claim to dislike rap music, the violence associated with gangsta rap tops the list. Born out of the late 1980s, gangsta rap originated in the Los Angeles area, particularly with N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" from their *Straight Outta Compton* album (Giovacchini par. 1). Songs like this one explicitly expressed the gangsta's way of life, which included money, sex, drugs, guns, and violence. By the early 1990s, artists such as Snoop Doggy Dogg, Ice-T, and Tupac Shakur had surfaced, all with ties to drugs and gangs. Tupac's "Can't C Me", off his 1996 album *All Eyez on Me*, offers an excellent example of the type of lyrics that characterized the '90s, better known as the "Dirty Decade" (Miller par. 1):

> Give me my money in stacks / And lace my bitches with dime figures / Real niggas fingers on nickel-plated 9 triggas / Must see my enemies defeated / I catch 'em while they coked up and weeded / Open fire, now them niggas bleedin'.

An overabundance of obscene songs like "Can't C Me" were produced during the Dirty Decade, leading to a radical dislike of the genre, particularly amongst white Americans.

Bethany Bryson spotlights white distaste for rap music in her extensive study published in the American Sociological Review. The 1996 study "'Anything But Heavy Metal': Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes" provides statistical evidence that backs up the notion that high-status whites claim a dislike of rap as a way to reinforce cultural boundaries between whites and blacks, finding that "negative attitudes toward social groups result in negative attitudes toward the types of music associated with that group" (895). Because rap fans tend to be black and less educated than most Americans, educated whites view them negatively. These high-status whites resolve to hate rap music as a means of keeping its fans at a distance—thus resisting class

integration with an undesirable group of people (895). By disliking rap, whites can be secretly socially exclusive, covering up their racism with problematic "truthful" statements such as, "It's convict music!" or "Only people from the ghetto listen to that stuff!"

Contrary to her findings regarding rap dislike, Bryson discovered that blues music is "significantly associated with non-dominant racial or ethnic groups" (895), leading to a broader acceptance of the genre. Although the blues was pioneered by black artists, white British groups such as Cream, the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, and John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers modeled their styles off of existing blues records, gaining popularity among American audiences. One could argue that blacks are not the only people to ever feel blue, but groups like the Rolling Stones, who take their name from Muddy Waters' 1950 single "Rollin' Stone", were definitely influenced by black music, and they would not be where they are today without it (Maycock par. 12). This "whitening" of the blues is best exemplified in *The Blues Brothers*, a 1980 comedy film that centers on a white duo played by Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi. In the movie, the Chicagoan brothers reassemble their old R&B band while escaping the law, covering tunes like Robert Johnson's 1937 blues hit "Sweet Home Chicago". If one were to search the song's title online, the first result to pop up would be a link to the Blues Brothers' version, not Robert Johnson's. Evidently, blues music has become less affiliated with its originators and more with the white artists who have appropriated it, suggesting that high-status white Chicagoans are even more accepting of the blues due to its "cultural ambiguity."

Conversely, many white Chicagoans are quick to criticize rap music because of its close associations with low-class blacks. For over a century, systemic racism has flourished within the city dominated by Irish, Polish, and Lithuanian immigrants and their offspring. Despite being a cultural hub, Chicago is host to many cultural issues—a contradiction best summed up in an

article titled “Racism, Ethnicity, and White Identity” from the Chicago Historical Society’s electronic encyclopedia:

> In the city’s past and present, two images contend. One emphasizes the astonishing cultural variety and vibrant cultural exchanges nourished in an atmosphere of tolerance. The other stresses how quickly and ruthlessly racial lines have been or can be drawn in the city sometimes called the nation’s “most segregated,” one that helped to teach Martin Luther King about a racism he had not encountered in the South. (par. 2)

The type of historic racism Martin Luther King witnessed was Chicago’s segregated housing practices. According to WBEZ 91.5FM Chicago reporter Natalia Y. Moore, as 500,000 blacks flocked to Chicago during the Great Migration, the real estate commission worked to contain the race to an area on the South Side known as “The Black Belt.” Moore notes that this area steadily grew in population after World War II, but its occupants were essentially stuck there because the real estate commission required that whites not lease to blacks (qtd. in Demby par. 3-4). In an effort to create housing for the black population—separate from the white population—the city built subsidized housing complexes, known to Chicagoans as simply “the projects.”

Shortly after construction, Chicago’s projects became synonymous with violent crime and gang activity. Complexes like Cabrini–Green and Robert Taylor Homes, constructed in 1942 and 1962, respectively, housed primarily destitute black Chicagoans, many of whom relied on public aid for their income (NewsOne Staff par. 12, 22). Living in poverty and surrounded by underperforming schools, many of the projects’ residents turned to crime and drugs. Gang activity flourished between groups such as the Gangster Disciples and People Nation, and record-high crime and murder rates plagued the city for decades.

In an attempt to gentrify the South Side, the city initiated The Plan For Transformation in 2000. Chicago's plan was to demolish and remodel the projects, but this process lead to more strife than harmony. Tony Delerme, a former South Sider, explains in his article "Chiraq, Drillinois" that because complexes like Cabrini–Green and Robert Taylor were knocked down, residents were displaced into other poor, crowded neighborhoods on the South Side, bringing rival gangs within close proximity; the city's gang problem spiraled out of control thereafter (par. 9). Mirroring the violence of the day's popular rap songs by artists like Snoop Doggy Dogg and Ice-T, Chicago's gang activity equaled gangsta rap in the eyes of white Chicagoans.

On account of high rates of gun violence amongst blacks, whites in Chicago have continued to claim a fervent dislike of rap. In 1990 on the Chicago-based *Oprah Winfrey Show*, white mothers voiced their opinions concerning rap songs recorded by Ice-T, pushing for censorship that would shelter their children from the gangsta lifestyle ("Oprah"). Furthermore, news outlets and politicians all the way up to the Commander in Chief often discuss Chicago's problem with gun violence, implanting an awfully negative image of Chicago into the mind's of many Americans. An article from Fox News states that in 2012, Chicago's death toll was higher than allied losses in Afghanistan, birthing the infamous nickname "Chiraq" (qtd. in Delerme par. 10). Inspired by lived experiences, controversial rapper Chief Keef emerged from Chiraq's violent depths, affirming white Chicagoans' beliefs that rap artists are "hoodlums."

A native of the South Side, Chief Keef reintroduced drill music, also known as "gangsta rap 2.0 due to its strong subject matter on gangs, guns, and drugs" (Delerme par. 2). Drill music sprung up during the public housing crisis of 2000, and when Chief Keef popularized the style in 2012 with his breakout single "I Don't Like", white Chicagoans responded in immediate disapproval (Delerme par. 7, 10). They accused Chief Keef of inciting violence, citing his

criminal record and affiliation with gang activity. Contrary to popular opinion, “Chiraq, Drillinois” author Delerme believes that drill music may actually be lowering homicide rates in Chicago because it provides a way for inner city youths to express themselves and discover their purpose (par. 14). According to a news report on CBS Chicago, in 2014, the city’s homicide rate was lower than it had been in 50 years (par. 1). A more recent CBS report acknowledges steadily declining homicide rates in 2017 (“Chicago Police”), and popular artist Chance the Rapper could only have a positive influence on those numbers.

Gaining recognition around the same time as Chief Keef, South Sider Chance the Rapper’s style differed immensely from drill music and gangsta rap. Through uplifting lyrics about the struggles of poverty and discrimination and through his charity work with the Chicago Public Schools, Chance has captured the hearts of millions. Clearly, Chief Keef and Chance’s styles do not align, but as hip-hop blogger Andrew Barber once noted, “they come from totally different backgrounds. Telling two different stories. They’re seeing things a different way. That’s why they’re both so important” (qtd. in Lee par. 3). What high-class white Chicagoans fail to consider is that an artist’s background and experiences play a major role in the type of music he produces. It is often difficult for privileged people to understand that music mirrors its environment rather than creates it. Pointing fingers is easy, but if white Chicagoans are going to continue to do so, they had better take a step back and acknowledge all of the powers at play, such as a violent and unstable upbringing, that may have lead Chief Keef to write a song called “Violence (War For Peace)”.

While similarities in blues and rap music abound—particularly due to their shared African lineage—white Chicagoans are less willing to accept rap music on account of historic racism within the city. Because whites have not yet been able to steal rap from black musicians

as they did in the case of the blues, rap has been discarded as vile and harmful. Even in Chicago, where profound, contemplative rap music has been produced by artists like Kanye West and Chance the Rapper, the city's white residents have allowed gangsta rap to inform their opinions about rap music and its artists. Though Chicago has a long way to go in terms of establishing equality between blacks and whites, by acknowledging and accepting the city's rap artists as legitimate, white Chicagoans can begin to make strides in that direction. In considering each Chicagoan's personal experiences, opening inclusive arms to the many who are struggling—who are not yet able to believe that "everything gonna be alright this mornin'"—may the beautiful city by the lake one day forge its way to peace.

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